

THE CROWE by Jacek Dukaj

Translated by Stanley S. Bill
(excerpt)

*Just then flew down a monstrous crow,
As black as a tar-barrel;
Which frightened both the heroes so,
They quite forgot their quarrel.*

“I know what you’re thinking about,” said Tweedledum: “but it isn’t so, nohow.” “Contrariwise,” continued Tweedledee, “if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn’t, it ain’t. That’s logic.”

Lewis Carroll *Through the Looking-Glass, And What Alice Found There*

He walked out into the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of an intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover.

Cormac McCarthy *The Road*

Listen up, this didn't really happen:

Long, long ago there was a little boy named Addy. Addy had a mamma and a papa, he had a little sister, a grandma, as well as uncles and aunts. They all lived in a big city on a river.

Near the city stood some factories. The factory chimneys spewed out thick clouds of smoke day and night. At dusk and dawn the sky above the city was colored like candy.

Addy's mamma worked in the office at one of the factories. His papa worked in another office, in the middle of the city. For most of the day they weren't at home. Then it was grandma who took care of Addy and his sister.

Father brought files full of printed and written papers home from work. He himself, even at home, would tap away on the typewriter in the evening and at night. Until mamma had to remind him that the children couldn't sleep while he was making such a racket. Then he would stop. Muttering angrily under his breath he would go out onto the balcony. There he would smoke a cigarette before going to bed.

Some bearded men would come and argue noisily about what papa had written on the typewriter. They too went out onto the balcony.

Addy learned to fall asleep to the sounds of the typewriter. Papa let him strike the keys himself too. Addy sat on his lap and stuck out his tongue. One after another he punched the letters very hard on the metal buttons. Papa wound on a clean sheet of paper especially for him. Addy tapped out onto the middle of the white rectangle: ADAM.

He took the sheet of paper. He always had it with him, folded up into a square. He had signed his name and so he knew how to write. He was very proud of himself.

He showed the sheet of paper to his little sister. But she only snorted and turned her eyes away. Little sister, he thought resentfully, is very stupid. She doesn't even know how to talk.

Father wrote on a typewriter because they didn't have a computer. In those days there were no computers. There was no Internet. There were no electronic games either. Black-and-white televisions showed two channels. Ugly men babbled away about boring things. In the cinemas they didn't show American films. And there was no music to listen to on iPods and mobile phones. There

were no mobile phones. At Addy's house there was no telephone at all.

The downstairs neighbor had a telephone: a very big bald man with a grey mustache. Papa talked with him often on the stairs and in front of the apartment block. Half the residents from their stairwell would drop in at the bald neighbor's place and use his phone. People called him too and then he would come and knock on the door, summoning the occupants to the phone in a booming voice.

Addy lived with his parents, his little sister and his grandma on the third floor of a concrete apartment block.

He climbed up onto the broad window sill and looked out through the window at the rows of more and more concrete blocks. Above them the great arms of cranes were still moving about. Sometimes Addy would see the workers clambering – higher and higher – up to the little cabins on the cranes. It was exciting: after all they might fall down.

He pressed his brow against the cold window pane. The workers walked across the roofs and shone their blue fire. From the fire colorful spots flew under Addy's eyelids. Grandma told him not to look there for he would go blind. Addy looked and he didn't go blind. He realized that grandma didn't know anything about construction.

Often he would simply sit for hours on the window sill and read books. Papa had taught him to read, even though Addy wasn't going to school yet.

That winter it happened that the ugly men also replaced the Sunday children's show on television. The schools were closed and some of the pre-schools too. Addy was even more bored than usual.

Uncle Kazek appeared at home. Mamma said that uncle had to stay here with them for a little while. Uncle Kazek sat through whole days by the radio, he argued noisily with papa about various incomprehensible matters and he smoked even smellier cigarettes. He slept in the kitchen on a mattress laid out under the radiator. He complained that the cold came in through the cracks in the window frames. He sneezed and blew his nose.

Mamma wouldn't let Addy go outside. So he couldn't even go sledging or throw snowballs with the children from the block.

Father and Uncle Kazek went downstairs to the neighbor. They came back and complained that

the telephone was still dead. Then they complained that it wasn't possible to talk because they were listening in on the line. Mamma spent a lot of time at the next-door neighbor's.

Addy took up his place on the window sill.

He began to read a book about the adventures of spies and partisans. The cold blew in from the window and grandma wrapped the boy in a blanket. From the morning she had looked very frightened. What could grandma be afraid of?

The housing project seemed to Addy to have been abandoned by the residents. Nobody was walking between the blocks. The sky to the east had darkened. Perhaps it was a cloud, or perhaps the smoke from the factories, now almost black. The snow was dirty too.

Sometimes in the evening, all huddled up as he looked out on the gray housing project, Addy began to feel a peculiar sadness. He had to swallow hard and blink for a long time.

The lights burned in the windows of the blocks. Addy watched the little people moving about in the little squares in the concrete, against yellow backgrounds, against blue-gray backgrounds. The blue-gray was where the television sets were on.

Grandma turned on the television too. On the television they were showing the babbling men. Then babbling men in uniforms. Then soldiers with cannons and tanks. Then the babbling men again. And then one man in a uniform, with a large head and in large glasses.¹

Somebody knocked on the door and grandma went out. Addy was left alone in the empty apartment with his little sister sleeping in the crib and the television on.

He pressed his cheek up against the cold window pane.

The housing project had disappeared into the darkness. He closed his left eye. He thought that he was the only person on the whole Earth. Well, there were those in the lightened windows, but after all they weren't real.

He breathed on the window pane. The world steamed up and misted over pleasantly, like in a fairy tale.

Grandma came back. She took one look at Addy, laid her hand against his brow and promptly

¹ A reference to General Wojciech Jaruzelski, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers Party, the communist leader who announced the imposition of martial law on state television on December 13, 1981.

packed him under an eiderdown. Addy really was sniffling loudly by now. Grandma blamed uncle Kazek. She had foretold that uncle would infect everyone in the house.

Addy fell asleep for a while, woke up, fell asleep again and woke up again. It was dark in the room. Only the crack of light under the door allowed him to tell pieces of furniture from monsters.

He went to the bathroom. His parents, uncle and grandma were sitting in the kitchen and arguing in hushed voices. Addy peed and then listened for a while, until he began to get chilly and he was seized by the shivers.

He went back to bed.

He fell asleep and woke up. He dreamed of the pictures from the television. Black-and-white generals. A giant crow² over some soldiers. The empty streets of dark cities.

He was sweating profusely. Mamma gave him hot tea with raspberry juice to drink. She bundled him up thoroughly and kissed him. He wanted to ask what was happening, but he saw that mamma was afraid too. He just pulled the eiderdown up higher, right up under his eyes. Now he was almost safe.

² The Polish word for crow is “wrona”. The title of this book, “Wroniec” (*The Crowe*), is an antiquated variant of the same word. In both cases, there is a clear symbolic reference to *WRON*, the ill-conceived acronym for the Military Council of National Salvation (*Wojskowa Rada Ocalenia Narodowego*) – the dictatorial body formed by General Jaruzelski upon the imposition of martial law.

In fact, the resemblance of this acronym (*WRON*) to the word for crow (*wrona*) was a rich source of dissident humor in Poland from the very beginning of the martial-law period.

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He awoke again. Something terrible was happening in the apartment, he knew it. Some noises had awoken Addy – but he only recognized them after a moment, as he sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

The window pane had shattered – what he had heard in his sleep was the crash of showering glass. Something heavy fell onto the floor too and mamma screamed in terror. It was all happening in his parents' room.

He jumped out from under the eiderdown and trotted down the hallway. Cold air blew over his feet. He began to sniffle again.

The door to his parents' room was ajar. The light was shining there. The racket hadn't ceased. Addy recognized Uncle Kazek's voice. Uncle was saying some very bad words.

Addy cautiously moved his little head to the door slit.

In the shattered window, on the broken window frame sat a giant Crowe, exactly like the one that Addy had dreamed of: black, glistening, dreadful.

The Crowe spread his wings and covered the whole wall, from the bookcase to the wall unit. In one taloned foot he clutched Addy's bloodied father, with the other he clung onto the window sill.

He lifted his meter-long beak and brought it down violently, a sharp and weighty pickaxe. He stabbed Addy's mamma with it. Mamma was trying to save papa, to pull him away; she didn't succeed. The foul bird struck mamma. She fell onto the floor, screaming in pain.

The Crowe opened his beak. He shook off the red drops from it and let out a dreadful screech, so that the echo resounded across the housing project.

The drapes and the curtains fluttered in shreds about the Crowe. The icy wind blew fountains of snow inside. The lamp swung below the ceiling, the crooked shadow of the Crowe leaped over the faded wallpaper.

Addy threw himself to his mamma's aid. Uncle Kazek caught him by the shoulder. The boy broke free and yelled.

The Crowe turned his black head around towards him. Enormous, flat eyes – glasses of coal – stared at Addy.

Addy was trembling with cold. He tightly clutched his uncle's pajamas. The pitch-black eyes must have sent out some invisible paralyzing rays, for Addy could not move a step either backward or

forward. The dead, icy gaze of the bird had frozen the boy to the floor.

“SON!” cawed the Crowe.

“Bang!” burst one of the light bulbs.

All of a sudden the Crowe folded up his wings, snatched up Addy’s unconscious father, and together with him swooped into the night.

All that remained was a whirlwind of black feathers, white snow and shreds of paper from the torn-up books. Documents and ripped-out pages were scattered about the whole room.

Addy and his uncle rushed to the window. The freezing gale wrung tears from their eyes. Addy wanted to climb onto the window sill, but his uncle held him back. He just pointed at the shadow fading into the nighttime sky above the housing project, above the roofs and cranes.

Uncle and grandma carried mamma into the other room. Uncle ran to the telephone. Grandma tried to dress mamma’s wounds. The Crowe had stabbed her above the heart. A red stain was spreading on mamma’s night shirt.

Mamma wasn’t opening her eyes.

Addy stood in the corner and bit his fingernails.

The neighbor with the telephone appeared.

“They’ll be here any minute,” he said.

Grandma looked back at the terrified Addy.

“Take him please, Mister Jan.”

Mister Jan took Addy in his arms. He ran out into the stairwell, panting heavily. On the stairs he passed Uncle Kazek. They shouted to each other as they ran.

Mister Jan hurriedly slammed the door of his apartment. He turned all the locks and put on some chains.

Catching his breath, he carefully moved the peephole aside and looked out through the glass eye at the stairwell.

“They’re coming,” he whispered.

“Who?”

“They.”

And he put his finger to his lips.

Addy pressed his ear against the door.

At first the wind blew through the stairwell. The shutters and the door frames banged. The doormats scraped. The downstairs door to the stairwell slammed. Then the stamp of many pairs of boots resounded. THUMP-WHUMP, THUMP-WHUMP. They were running, but it was as if they weren't in any hurry at all. Floor after floor, closer and closer. Addy took his ear off the door for a moment. They didn't stop, they ran on up the stairs. To Addy's apartment.

Mister Jan put his finger to his lips again. They heard grandma's screams. Uncle Kazek was loudly saying something too.

The steps began to get closer again. They ran past back downstairs. THUMP-WHUMP, THUMP-WHUMP. For the second time the downstairs door to the stairwell slammed.

And silence.

Mister Jan opened the door and looked outside. Addy slipped out from under his arm and dashed upstairs first, into his home.

There was no home now. They had broken, smashed, ripped, tipped over, knocked over, shattered, scattered, perforated, poured out, torn out, hacked, crumpled, mixed up, soiled, spoiled, and destroyed.

Addy looked over at his little sister's crib. Empty.

Not a trace of mamma, grandma and Uncle Kazek either.

All the windows open or smashed. Over the ruins howled the wind with the snow.

Mister Jan and Addy trod over the clothes, papers, bits of appliances and furniture.

"Where's mamma?"

"They've taken them."

Addy climbed up onto the window sill. Mister Jan caught him by the collar.

In the snow below the apartment block could be seen the tracks of enormous canine paws with a deep tire tread in a herringbone pattern. By the communal trash heap a man stood in a black overcoat with the five-meter needle of an antenna rising out of the top of his skull. He was turning his head around to all sides and the steel spike drew circles and figure-eights in the night.

"The Hounds³ took them," grumbled-growled Mister Jan, squeezing Addy towards him with a fat arm. To the boy it sounded as if a cement mixer were turning in the depths of the bald neighbor's chest.

"They've left a Spiky Spook. Be careful, kid, or he'll see us. He reports everything to the Crowe."

Addy shivered.

³ The paddy wagon vehicles used by the communist police were colloquially known as "Suki," literally meaning "Bitches."

“C-c-cold.”

They went back to Mister Jan’s apartment.

Mister Jan brewed some tea. From a bottle into a glass he poured himself Something Stronger. He gulped it down and exhaled.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Addy,” sniffed Addy.

The neighbor extended a giant hand to him.

“Jan Stanisław Wieńczysław Mortar”

With some difficulty Addy squeezed Mister Mortar’s thumb and index finger.

“Why do you have such big hands, sir?”

“With these two hands!” boomed Mister Mortar. “With these two hands I have built!”

“What have you built, sir?”

“Houses! Streets! We have built factories! Cities!”

“Aha.”

Mister Mortar went back upstairs to fetch some warm clothes for Addy.

In the meantime Addy looked at the old photographs of Jan Stanisław Wieńczysław standing on the bookcase. All of them were taken on large building sites. Mister Mortar still had hair on his head. Stripped to the waist he stood with bricks in his hands. Or with a putty knife and a bucket. In the background were the construction machines. And all around them walls and concrete pillars rose up. On them hung ribbons and banners. 1000 PERCENT OF THE QUOTA. 20000 PERCENT OF THE QUOTA. 250000 PERCENT OF THE QUOTA.

There were also two smaller pictures, to one side. A slightly older Mister Mortar was accompanied in them by a pretty lady with very long hair and a boy: first at a few years old and then as a teenager. All of them were smiling broadly.

Mister Jan, with some difficulty, had found some good clothes for Addy. The sweater was torn at the sleeve, the trousers had a hole in them, and the shoes didn’t match. On the coat half the collar had been torn off.

“We’ll wait a bit,” said Mister Jan. “Your uncle called the family. Everything’s going to be fine, kid. Auntie or grandpa will take you away before the Crowe finds out.”

“But what about papa? What about mamma, please sir?”

Mister Jan rubbed his bald head.

“Ah, that. A nasty business.”

“But they’ll be back, won’t they?”

“You don’t mess with the Crowe.”

Somebody knocked on the door.

It was Mister Jan’s next-door neighbor. He had heard everything. And maybe he’d seen it too through the peephole.

He came in came in and he chattered chattered at Mister Jan. Mister Jan was nodding his head. The neighbor smiled smiled at Addy. Addy pretended that he was only interested in the hot tea, which he slurped from a teaspoon.

“I can I can give give you you the keys the keys to the passage to the passage through the cellar through the cellar,” said the neighbor.

Mister Jan thanked him. The neighbor went went to his place for the keys.

“Why is that man double like that?” Addy asked Mister Jan.

“What are you on about?”

“He does everything double and he talks double.”

Mister Mortar wrinkled his brow and shrugged his shoulders.

But then at once he clapped his hand to his forehead.

“We’ve got a Double Agent right under our noses!”

“A Double Agent?”

“An Agent, you see, is one who acts. You act, kid, I act. But each after himself, for himself. But there are Double Agents: they act both in their own and in someone else’s name. Openly and in secret. In one way and the other. In truth and in lies. As if to the right, but really to the left. As if it were this, but really that. Do you understand?”

“I don’t know. As if it’s his doing, but it’s also the doing of - who? The Crowe?”

“The Crowe,” Mister Mortar ground his teeth and clenched his great fists.

The neighbor came back came back with the keys.

“A thousand thanks,” said Mister Mortar and shook his hand.

The neighbor paled paled and wailed wailed.

Mister Mortar had caught him by the neck and pressed him against the wall. The neighbor goggled goggled his eyes. With one hand Mister Mortar crushed him into the wall of the apartment block, while he smashed the other into the concrete and brushed it aside.

“With these two hands!” he rumbled, reddening from the effort. “With these two hands I’ll show you!”

The neighbor kicked his legs, flailed, punched in all directions. But on Mister Jan it made no impression.

He mashed the Double Agent into the concrete until he had mashed him completely. Then he patted down the surface of the great slab with his hands so that not a trace remained, and he wiped his grey mustache.

“Ooph. A makeshift arrangement. But it’ll do.”

Mister Jan sat down on the sofa bed. He sat like that for a long time, resting his chin on his fists and staring at the wall.

Addy had drunk all of his tea. Normally he’d feel like sleeping, but he was too frightened. He was afraid for his parents too and for his little sister and grandma and uncle.

The Phone Book fell from the little table under the phone. Mister Jan got up, put on a thick coat and pulled a fur shapka over his bald head.

“We’re going, kid.”

“And auntie?”

“Auntie’s been exposed.”

“What?”

“The Screech-Owl Snitchers and that double. We can’t wait.”

They went out into the stairwell and silently went down to the landing above the ground floor. Mister Mortar looked out through a small window.

“The Spook. We won’t get out this way.”

“And through the cellars?”

“That’s what they want us to do! Probably some UAs or other Boobies have hidden themselves down there.”⁴

They went down to the ground floor. Mister Jan caught hold of Addy tightly. Addy couldn’t see very well in the dark what Mister Mortar was doing.

Suddenly he lifted the boy up and put him through a hole in the wall into the interior of a dark apartment. Then, grunting and panting, he himself climbed through the hole.

“Come on, kid. The Nowackis have gone to see their grandchildren. We’ll get out through the balcony.”

⁴ Booby: from UB, the acronym for the detested “Office of Security” (*Urząd Bezpieczeństwa*), the communist secret police force. UB operatives were known as “UBs.”

UA: Unknown Assailant. When dissidents were beaten or killed by UB operatives, the official investigation often blamed “unknown assailants.”

They groped their way through the Nowackis' silent apartment. Addy thought that it was some kind of ghost hunt. Only that now he and Mister Jan were the ghosts. And what if they were to come across Mister Nowacki now? He'd be frightened to death!

They went out onto the balcony. Mister Mortar lifted Addy up onto the balustrade and lowered him down onto the snow. Addy glanced around the housing project. Only the gray glow of televisions flickered in the countless little squares of the windows.

As they were walking along the block, Addy craned his neck to see inside the apartments.

Whole families were sitting there in front of televisions. The bulging picture tubes cast patches of grainy grayness onto their faces and clothes. There was a warm quietness in these scUA. A normal evening, normal parents and children. It stabbed Addy in the heart.

Mister Mortar turned the boy's head round and covered his eyes with a great hand.

"Don't look."

They went out onto the street behind the builders' shed.

Mister Jan pointed to the black strokes against the background of the night, over the roofs of the lowest buildings: the antennas of the Spooks. It looked as though under every apartment block in the project at least one Spook was on the lookout.

"We won't get far now, kid. We'll stay the night and then see. I've got an old buddy here."

Addy was tired now. He didn't reply. The cold was stinging his cheeks and scratching his throat. The boy strode through the snow with difficulty. He squeezed Jan's hand tightly. Now what? What about papa? What about mamma? Where was grandma, where was uncle, where was his little sister? The Crowe had flown in through the window in the middle of the night and torn his world into shreds. Addy took little steps with his head lowered and sniffled his nose.

The old buddy of Jan Stanisław Wieńczysław Mortar lived in a storeroom by the thermal power station. Inside it was very hot and very stuffy. Mister Jan's buddy had a beard like Blackbeard and he smoked a big pipe.

The two adults discussed long and loudly. Addy's eyelids drooped. He didn't hear, he didn't understand.

Blackbeard made him a bed on the sofa behind the wardrobe and gave him three blankets. But before long Addy had dug himself out from under the blankets and stolen up to Mister Jan, who was snoring noisily on a folded-out armchair. He clambered in onto the breast of the bald, mustachioed man and hugged him tightly.

Mister Jan opened one eye, looked up and pulled the old quilt over Addy.

Addy fell asleep to the sounds of the turning cement mixer, huddled up under the mighty arm of Mister Mortar.